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Brevity is the soul of wit

“Language is worth a thousand pounds a word”

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“Language is worth a thousand pounds a word”

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- 1 **Axiom** (kindly provided by the editors): *Brevity is the soul of wit.*
- 2 **Thesis 1.** The following text will not simply develop the axiom, it will embody it. As a consequence, it will be composed of (empirical) **propositions**, which will help formulate a **problem**, and of (theoretical) **theses** that will sketch a **solution**, excluding all forms of digression, development or explanation.
- 3 **Proposition 1.** Here is a text:

Harris is a fellar who likes to play ladedda, and he like English customs and things, he does be polite and say thank you and he does get up on the bus and the tube to let woman sit down, which is a thing even them Englishmen don't do. And when he dress, you think is some Englishman going to work in the city, bowler and umbrella, and briefcase tuck under the arm, with *The Times* fold up in the pocket so the name would show, and he walking upright like if he is alone who alive in the world. Only thing, Harris face black. (Selvon 103)
- 4 **Proposition 2.** This is a passage from *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), a novel by Sam Selvon, an early example of a diasporic novel—one of the earliest, but also undoubtedly one of the best.
- 5 **Proposition 3.** The novel tells the story of the difficult integration, in the mid-fifties, of the first wave of West Indian immigrants, in a not so welcoming London (hence the title). Among a host of characters, Harris takes this need to integrate to its extreme consequences: even if he never acknowledges it, he is the only one who votes conservative (these immigrants, unlike their equivalents today, are British citizens—they have a passport and political rights).
- 6 **Proposition 4.** The last sentence in the passage quoted is a perfect embodiment of the axiom, in that it illustrates two of its terms, *brevity* and *wit*. This is an (empirical) **proposition** rather than a (theoretical) **thesis**, in so far as the merest reading of the text will induce readers to grant me this point.

- 7 **Problem.** How can we account for the force of the last sentence of this passage? Or again, how can we show that this force has something to do with its *brevity* and *wit*?
- 8 **Proposition 5.** Classical rhetoric tells me that the last sentence of the passage is what is known in French as a *chute*—or ‘punchline’ in English—, and more specifically that this *chute* is a form of conceit. At this point, were not my text structurally laconic, I might risk a play on words, as Harris, being rather pleased with himself, in other words conceited, is exposed and mocked by way of a rhetorical conceit.
- 9 **Thesis 1.** The *chute* of the passage owes its force to its *brevity*. You will note that we have gone from an (empirical) **proposition**, which merely describes a coincidence (between the *brevity* of the sentence and its force) to a (theoretical) **thesis**, which causally links force and *brevity*.
- 10 **Thesis 2.** Such *brevity* has no *soul* but a material body—a body of language. It may be measured (by the number of syllables), it may be contrasted (the last sentence is deliberately laconic, in strong contrast, in both rhythm and length, with the preceding sentences). In short, this last sentence is meant, not merely to be read, but to be uttered, or even shouted, *au gueuloir* as Flaubert used to say. In the case of this passage, reading is always also reading aloud.
- 11 **Thesis 3.** This material body has one striking characteristic: it is the product of a subversion of Standard English. I do not know whether this is a (theoretical) **thesis** or an (empirical) **proposition**, but I know that if I found such a sentence in a student’s prose, I would underline it in petulant red. The following **propositions** are a description of this subversion (which consists in the literal breaching of a few elementary rules of grammar).
- 12 **Proposition 6.** In the last sentence of the passage, there are no articles. This, of course, contributes to the *brevity* of the text, through ellipsis.
- 13 **Proposition 7.** In the last sentence of the passage, there is no copula, with the same consequent *brevity*.
- 14 **Proposition 8.** In the last sentence of the text, meaning has been integrally preserved. Grammatical dereliction does not produce semantic uncertainty. This is an interesting conclusion, well deserving its own **thesis**.
- 15 **Thesis 4.** Not all forms of agrammaticality ruin a text (as is the case in etymological delirium, when the text leaves the straight furrow of the construction of meaning). Some actually contribute to its construction: this we call style, at least in the definition of Gilles Deleuze (1993), who claims that style stutters language, through rolling and pitching.
- 16 **Thesis 5.** In such positive agrammaticality does *brevity* meet *wit*, but not in the sense of Sigmund Freud, the celebrated humorist—not through *double entendre*, allusion and play on words (see his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1960). *Wit* in this case is not the product of semantic short-circuiting, but of the very laconicism of the expression. By *soul* in the axiom we mean essence: *brevity* is the essence of *wit*.
- 17 **Proposition 8.** Actually, the passage is not an instance of agrammaticality. It is written in the West Indian English of Trinidad, one of the New Englishes. Sam Selvon started writing his novel in Standard English, but he soon desisted since, as he says, “it did not work”. The passage quoted (there is a **thesis** implicit in this) justifies his decision.

- 18 **Proposition 9.** Nevertheless, Standard English is present in the passage, albeit implicitly. The vast majority of Selvon's potential readers are not familiar with Trinidad English, but all of them understand Standard English, even if their mother tongue is another dialect or another language. At this point, we may specify our problem.
- 19 **Problem (now specified).** If the decision to write in Trinidadian English (which is not the same dialect as the local creole) gives the *chute* its *brevity* and force, which amount to a form of *wit*, how can the clash of dialects (overt West Indian English and covert Standard English) be the *cause* of such *brevity* and *wit*?
- 20 **Thesis 5.** Trinidadian English allows the last sentence of our passage to convey not merely a semantic content but also an illocutionary force, which Standard English could not convey.
- 21 **Proposition 10.** In order to establish this, we need a translation of the sentence into Standard English: *the only problem is that Harris's face is black*.
- 22 **Proposition 11.** Were the text written in Standard English, this last sentence would be a good instance of a *chute*, deserving praise for its *wit*, and even for its *brevity*. However, it is obvious that the actual sentence, as we read it in the quoted passage, deserves the same praise, only to a much higher degree, just as it is obvious that, according to **Thesis 1**, the increase in *wit* is due to the increase in *brevity*, if I may say so. This, however, needs further justification.
- 23 **Thesis 6.** The West Indian dialect does not only convey an illocutionary force, it also produces a perlocutionary effect on the reader.
- 24 **Thesis 7.** The illocutionary force captures the reader (the reader experiences a language event, in the strongest sense of the term) and the perlocutionary effect is one of exhilaration (this is the typical effect of *wit*). The combination of force and effect interpellates both the character (whose conceit is exposed) and the reader (who feels exhilarated).
- 25 **Thesis 8.** If the West Indian dialect conveys a force and produces an effect, it is because this dialect of English illustrates, although in a distorted fashion, what Jakobson (1960) calls the "poetic function" of language.
- 26 **Proposition 12.** We remember that, among the six functions of language distinguished by Jakobson, there is a "poetic function", the effect of which is to project the paradigmatic onto the syntagmatic axis. We also remember that his canonical example is the slogan for the Eisenhower campaign, "I like Ike", which is more notable for the obsessive repetition of its phonemes than for its political brilliance.
- 27 **Thesis 8 (extended).** In the last sentence of Selvon's text, we would be hard put to state that the paradigmatic is projected onto the syntagmatic, as is the case in the Eisenhower slogan, where the paradigm of vowels and consonants is deployed, through repetition, on the syntagmatic axis. In fact, the opposite is true: the markers of syntagmatic linking have vanished—what traditional grammar used to call the "tool words" (*les mots outils*): article, copula and genitive affix. The only marker of syntagmatic order left is the order of words, which is enough to preserve meaning. It is not so much a case of the disappearance of syntagmatic linking as of its maximal abbreviation, which of course is a fine instance of our **axiom** (kindly provided by the editors). We are still within the scope of the poetic function which appears not to be relevant, as its main characteristic is that *form* dominates *meaning* (both the projection

of the paradigmatic axis onto the syntagmatic and the dissolution of the syntagmatic axis prevent me from forgetting the *form* of the utterance when I seek access to its *meaning*).

- 28 **Thesis 9.** The West Indian dialect has a *poetic* effect on the Standard dialect. This thesis suggest a solution to my **problem (now specified)**: the clash of dialects is a form of poetic subversion of the Standard dialect by a dialect that is socially and politically dominated by other dialects. This is a case of what Deleuze and Guattari (1975) call a process of minoration (of the major dialect by the multiplicity of minor dialects). In the case of our text, such minoration takes the form of an abbreviation of the syntagmatic linkage (*brevity*), which animates the text (it gives it its *soul*) by conveying an illocutionary force and a perlocutionary effect of exhilaration (*wit*). With the last sentence of our quoted passage, we come as close as we possibly can to the **solution** of our initial **problem**.
- 29 **Proposition 13.** Thesis 9 may be illustrated by a host of texts in contemporary literature in English: from Dylan's *Under Milk Wood* (1954) to Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and Ken Saro Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985).
- 30 **Proposition 14.** Were not this text structurally laconic, I could provide numerous other instances of this poetic subversion through minoration in Selvon's novel. It would show that abbreviation, as might be expected, is not the only form of poetic subversion of Standard English.
- 31 **Thesis 10.** I would submit (such generalization must be taken as a provocation) that postcolonial Englishes (what goes by the name of *New Englishes*) keep the English language alive. It follows from this that postcolonial novels are the future of the English novel, even as Aragon said that woman is the future of man.
- 32 **Thesis 11.** I may add that if *brevity* is the source of *wit* through an operation of interpellation (see **Thesis 7**), this opens the way to a philosophy of language other than the usual or mainstream one—a philosophy of language centering on the linguistic *agon*, in which the primary function of language is not to communicate information but to exert a force that interpellates subjects in the respective positions in which they find themselves. But it would need a whole book to establish this.
- 33 I am afraid my text has not kept its promise of homology between content and form, as stated in **Thesis 1**. Rather than adding supplementary **theses**, what I need at this point is another text, which will, spectacularly and definitively, illustrate the **axiom**.
- 34 **Proposition 15.** Here is another text:
- w w w w.
- 35 **Proposition 16.** This French poem by Georges Perec is composed of a single alexandrine.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper studies the following axiom: 'brevity is the soul of wit' through a series of 11 theses and 16 propositions. It takes as proof an extract from Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). The author suggests that if brevity is the source of wit thanks to a process of interpellation, this opens the way to a novel philosophy of language, one which centers on the linguistic *agon*, in which the primary function of language is not to communicate information but to exert a force that interpellates subjects in the respective positions in which they find themselves.

Cette contribution examine l'axiome suivant : « *brevity is the soul of wit* », au travers de 11 thèses et 16 propositions qui s'appuient sur une analyse d'un extrait du roman de Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). L'auteur montre que si *brevity* entraîne *wit* par une opération d'interpellation, cela engage une autre philosophie du langage que l'habituelle ou la dominante — une philosophie du langage centrée sur l'agonistique, dans laquelle la première fonction du langage n'est pas de communiquer de l'information mais d'impulser une force pour interpellier des sujets à leurs places respectives.

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Mots-clés: pragmatique, philosophie du langage, agon, interpellation, Selvon Sam, brièveté, langage, Trinidad

Keywords: pragmatics, philosophy of language, agon, interpellation, Selvon Sam, brevity, language, Trinidad

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